THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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CHAPTER I

CLASSICAL AND ENGLISH ANTECEDENTS

The problem of evil has been reflected in literature almost from the beginning of literary history. An introduction to a study of evil in certain of Shakespeare's plays must necessarily be limited to a survey of the most obvious expressions of the problem in the drama before Shakespeare. Some particular plays, representative of the periods in which they were written, will serve to indicate considerations of the problem and to illustrate concepts of evil found in classical, medieval, and Renaissance drama.

Greek drama emphasizes the functions of the gods in relation to the good and evil in human experience. Contrary to a common conception of the offices of the Greek Fates, they do not determine whether a man shall be good or bad; they determine only the circumstances to which man reacts. He is good or bad as he reacts to the circumstances which the Fates put in his way. Man is free to act as he chooses; he is a free moral agent. Through his free choice, his character is revealed. Consciously or unconsciously, then, man is the cause of his own prosperity, which results from virtue, or of his own misfortune, which results from sin. This is far from the mechanical conception of "poetic justice," according to which the good prosper and the evil suffer. For the Greeks, there was a definite moral order in which man is held responsible for his actions, but in which the element of fate has a relevant part.[1]

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[1] Paul Landis, editor, Introduction to Four Famous Greek Plays. New York: The Modern Library, 1929, pp. 11-13.

According to Aeschylus in the Agamemnon, pride is a source of evil, which comes from a man's assumption that he is able to set aside the laws of the Fates, against which even Zeus cannot prevail. It is only through recognizing these hard and fast rules and acting in accordance with them that man can hope to gain prosperity. A continued state of well-being is apt to engender pride, which, in turn, can lead only to calamity. A man may come to feel so secure in his material wealth and in his ability to exercise authority over the fortunes of other men, that he no longer feels subservient to a higher law.

As Aeschylus asserts through the commentary of the Chorus on the Trojan War which lies in the background of the play, pride was the great sin of the Trojans and the cause of their downfall. These proud "warrior-kings" had enjoyed such a long period of power and riches that they had forgot reverence, had become a law unto themselves, and were defying the laws of man and God. In its infancy, their pride was not so fearful to look upon, but as it grew, it gave birth to a still greater pride "with plenteous increase, like to like succeeding," until it found expression in "Infatuate Boldness." This was the greatest proportion to which Trojan pride could grow. Ruin was the next inevitable step, and the dying ashes on Trojan altars bore testimony to the fate of Trojan wealth. In the Agamemnon, then, prosperity caused the excessive pride of the Trojans, which led to their ruin.[2]

Likewise, Agamemnon, the victor over the Trojans, was afflicted with evil because of his excessive pride. However, the curse of the Pelops family is primarily responsible for his downfall. This evil originated

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2 "Agamemnon," Four Famous Greek Plays, p. 30.

in his ancestor, Tantalus, who, wishing to test the knowledge of the gods, slew his son and served him to them at a meal. The curse continued to motivate his more immediate ancestor, Atreus, who feigning gladness at the sight of his banished brother, fed him a banquet of his own children. For these acts, the race of the Pelopidae was "wedded to calamity." The Chorus emphasizes the impression of doom when it gives recognition to "the spirit of recompense from other ages," and

> . . . the spirit of Vengeance awaking from sleep
> For the banquet by Atreus of old to Thyestes cruelly given.[3]

It is the Aeschylean idea that ancestral crimes will issue in "impious deeds," that evil will breed evil. Nevertheless, the individual is still morally responsible. Although Agamemnon's pride is the instrument by which the curse of his house can be fulfilled, his pride is engendered in himself. Agamemnon was a man worthy of envy; he had been endowed with the highest gifts Heaven could bestow. Even as he proclaimed modesty as the greatest virtue, he looked down upon the purple carpet Clytemnestra had spread for his triumphal homecoming and thought that a god might envy his position. Immediately, the Chorus voiced a haunting fear and foretold his fate. "The man's full fortune but prepares his doom."[4] If he had exhibited caution and had been willing to lay aside the pride which possessed him when he agreed to the sacrifice of his daughter, when he shamed Clytemnestra by his dalliance with women in Troy and forced Cassandra to accompany him on

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[3] Op. cit., p. 55.

[4] Op. cit., p. 38.

his return, he could have averted the catastrophe. Rashness and a want of prudence are associated with pride. They can end only in disaster.

Intemperance is another source of evil found in Greek drama. The individual who is not well-rounded, who devotes himself excessively to some phases of life and neglects others so that a part of his personality is developed at the expense of other parts, is headed for ruin. An overzealous pursuit of virtue is as disastrous as an enthusiasm for vice. The happy and prosperous man keeps the middle course, living in self-restraint, moderation, and self-control. Euripides makes his Hippolytus guilty of the sin of intemperance. Although he had lived a pure life and was recognized among his fellows as a chaste youth, he was virtuous to a fault. His noble soul was his ruin. Because Hippolytus was fond of the chase and the chariot and devoted himself wholly to Artemis, while he purposely neglected the altars of Aphrodite, he received warning from an old huntsman that only evil could follow such a course. Hippolytus perished under the hoofs of the steeds that drew his chariot, steeds that he had fed with his own hand but could no longer control. His destruction was proof that he had sinned.

Euripides shows unrestrained passion as another kind of intemperance. His Phaedra was the victim of passionate desire, and his Medea was consumed by her love for Jason. Even Theseus had to pay the penalty for his incontinence as a youth, his hasty judgment, and his overpowering rage against his son.

The two sources of evil thus far noted are pride, resulting from prosperity and leading to a disregard of the laws of cause and effect established by the Fates, and intemperance, or excessive devotion to

one virtue at the expense of others just as necessary.

However, they do not represent all the ideas of evil found in Greek drama. Sophocles, for instance, has a very different treatment. He is aware of aspects of the problem that the explanations of Aeschylus and Euripides cannot cover. He develops tragically both Creon, the proud sinner who has enjoyed honor and prosperity all his days in spite of his disregard for justice and worship at the shrine of divine images, and the true, upright patriot who falls prey to the worst evils that can come to a man though his goodness is vastly in excess of his flaws. Their tragic experience cannot be explained by the same system of justice that brought ruin to the insolent tyrant "who scales the precipitous heights and grasps the throne," or that brought disaster to the man "who does too much." Sophocles is not so much interested in why a man has to endure, as in what and how a man endures under the unjust laws of <u>such</u> a universe; he therefore scrutinizes the good man suffering punishment far beyond his deserts.[5]

Oedipus Rex was such a man. He was a good king, he had proved worthy of the respect and love of all his countrymen, and had tried to follow the divine law; yet his people were visited with plagues and wars which were attributed to him, and he himself was made to endure the greatest punishment that he could conceive. But Oedipus was not wholly blameless. He showed all sorts of <u>hybris</u>. Even though

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[5] Paul Landis, editor, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 15.

he was provoked to the murder of Laius, he should have restrained his passion that came from a hasty and impulsive temperament, with something, too, of proud self-assertion. Oedipus fits the demand of Aristotle's tragic hero:

> a man who morally stands midway between two extremes. He is not eminently good or just, though he leans to the side of goodness. He is involved in misfortune, not however, as the result of deliberate vice, but through some great flaw of character or fatal error in conduct.[6]

In the Oedipus Rex, Sophocles' chief interest does not lie in the laws that govern life; his sympathy is with man and his capacity for suffering under laws that cannot be explained by any preconceived ideas of justice.

The author of The Book of Job deals with a much more nearly perfect man than Oedipus Rex, but under much the same kind of circumstances. He goes a step further than Sophocles' recognition of the unjust dispensations of fortune. He justifies the ways of God to man by showing that the afflictions of the righteous man are trials leading to a higher blessedness.

Job was the ideally wise and happy man. His piety was reflected in the great prosperity that attended him. But suddenly a great change came. In a short time, he lost his children, his material wealth, his health, and his reputation. Because of this tragedy, his three friends came to offer their condolences and to provoke him to repentance, for they did not know what the author tells in the prologue, that God was not punishing Job for his sin. As they reflected upon the cause of

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[6] S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art. London: Macmillan and Company, 1911, p. 304.

Job's misfortunes, they advocated the old view, that to receive so great a punishment, Job must have sinned greatly. They believed him guilty. They thought that just as the cause of the calamity lay within Job, so was the possibility of its removal within him through a confession of sin and a complete change of heart. Job did not doubt that in God's government of mankind, prosperity ought to follow goodness and calamity overtake sin, but standing firm in the belief of his own innocence, he could not accept the retribution dogma. Job thought that if the outward lot of man is a true reflection of the mind of God toward man, then God wrongly held him guilty. Despite Elihu's insistence upon the goodness of God and his own absolute trust in his Goel, Job cried out that he was being unduly punished and demanded that God speak and solve the riddle of his sufferings. When he heard the voice from the whirlwind, he realized his lack of wisdom for criticizing the divine government, came into a full knowledge of the power of God for the first time, and humbled himself in dust and ashes before a loving God. This would have been enough for Job, but it was not enough for his Creator. Job received an outward sign of God's beneficence, "twice as much as he had before."[7] His kinsmen came to him with comfort and with gifts, children were born to him, and he died at a ripe old age.

It seems fairly clear that the author of The Book of Job, like Sophocles, believes that prosperity and adversity are not necessarily connected with goodness and wickedness. God's speech would seem to imply that man is not to understand the course of the divine mind as

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[7] The Book of Job, xlii, 10.

it affects his fortunes. He must simply accept circumstances as he finds them. In the case of Job, according to the prologue, the righteous man may be visited with severe afflictions which it is wrong to consider due to any special sins on his part or to regard as signs of God's displeasure. They are permitted rather to elevate the pious mind to a higher degree of godliness. Job's restoration and peace shows that God will at last deliver the sufferer if he perseveres in his righteousness.

In Seneca, there is a variety of treatments of the subject of good and of evil so that it would be difficult to extract Seneca's philosophy concerning the problem of evil from his plays. However, in the Hercules Furens, Seneca presents much the same kind of problem as does The Book of Job, in that Hercules believed that he would be held guilty for the deed until he sought forgiveness. Because he had been able to triumph over every difficulty that had been raised against him, he incited the envy of Juno, who resolved to make him his own destroyer. He became mad, killed his wife and children, and fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke, recovered from his madness, he sought the Stoic procedure of self-destruction, suicide. He felt there was no longer any use in looking to the gods; in leaving him to Juno's persecution, even his father, the king of the gods, had forgotten him. The evil represented here, then, is in consequence of the deterioration in the character of the gods.

Seneca's Oedipus Rex presents the Stoic theory of predestination in all its naked repulsiveness. "Prayer is useless, God is unable to

influence events; Lachesis, the wrinkled beldame of fate, her blind symbol, has once for all settled the nexus of cause and effect."[8] The Medea of Seneca ends in a declaration of atheism. When Jason had lost all that he had held dear after pursuing the course which to him seemed best, he was driven to cry out, "Where'er you go, bear witness that there are no gods."[9] Seneca does not leave his Hercules in this deep despair at the thoughts of a cruel universe. He persuades him to seek purification in the belief that there are gods who will hear and hold him innocent. This doctrine comes very near to the teachings of the early Christian Church.

During the Middle Ages, literature was so much under the domination of the Roman Catholic Church and so intently followed the guidance of the Scriptures, that the doctrines inculcated in the drama of the time were Christian. Early Christian teachers found it convenient to fix and classify those faults of conduct which were considered dangerous to the salvation of their church members. They made no distinction between those based on expedient action and those based on scriptural teaching. These "deadly sins," as they came to be called, occupied an important place in the order and discipline of the Roman Catholic Church, and along with the cardinal virtues, constituted its moral standards and tests.[10] The early church contended that in respect

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8 Charles Cruttwell, History of Roman Literature. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1893, p. 376.

9 Hugh Macmaster Kingery, Notes on Three Tragedies of Seneca. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1909, p. 310.

10 A.B.D. Alexander, "Seven Deadly Sins," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1928, Volume XI, p. 426.

both of character and effects, some sins are graver than others, and as the church doctrine grew more explicit, it became necessary to define more clearly the difference between various sins. Gregory speaks of seven, which are regarded as successive stages in a downward course of evil. All of these sins have social aspects. The list includes all the common and obvious sins which belong to all men and all times, traced back to the pride of self from which all the forms of sinfulness really flow, that self-assertion which is the point at which the human will breaks away from God.

Everyman, the most famous of the moralities, deals with ideas important in the devotional literature of the later Middle Ages. God looked down upon the earth to find men "drown'd in sin" and living without fear:

> They use the seven deadly sins damnable
> As pride, covetise, wrath, and lechery.[11]

He thought Everyman should be brought to a reckoning through his messenger, Death. From all of Everyman's earthly friends, among whom were Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods, only his Good Deeds chained to earth by Everyman's sins was willing to accompany him into the grave. As soon as Everyman was led to penance through confession, the shackles fell from Good Deeds, and Strength, Discretion, and Beauty came to his side. Everyman went to the priest for holy sacrament, for, according to the strict Catholic point of view, the priest bore all the keys for man's redemption. The fact that in the language of the church, the term, Good Deeds, implies not just things done for good, but things

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11 "Everyman," From Beowulf to Thomas Hardy, (Revised Edition). Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1931, Vol. I, p. 118.

done in strict adherence to the rules of Catholicism, strengthens the lesson of Everyman that good can come only through living in accordance with church teachings.

A fine outgrowth of the morality play in the Renaissance is Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, in which, as in the medieval moralities, the good and bad powers contend for the possession of the soul of man. Marlowe shows a man losing his soul in the struggle with evil in a course of degeneration, beginning with pride, the deadliest of the "seven sins."

Bored with the heights he had reached in scholarship, Faustus looked to the promises of magic to give him all the power in the world. He had fallen prey to all the vices that the seven deadly sins represented. He scorned spiritual values, held in contempt the study of theology, science, and philosophy, and set his heart on wealth, power, rich clothes, and sensual pleasures. Selling his soul to the devil for twenty-four years gave him all the power, through knowledge, that the Renaissance desired so passionately. Finally, he became bored, tired, disillusioned, and began to long for the immortality that he had thrown away. He bargained with God to no purpose; and in the last terrible scene, he was carried off to hell by devils. The Chorus exhorted the wise:

> Only to wonder at unlawful things
> Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
> To practice more than heavenly power permits.[12]

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12 "Faustus," From Beowulf to Thomas Hardy, (Revised Edition). Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1931, Vol. I, pp. 170, ll. 1683-1685.

Marlowe, like the authors of moralities, points out the course of evil and pictures the judgment that will fall upon man if he does not avoid such a course, but he is primarily concerned with the dangers of the Renaissance, especially excessive individualism which carries a man beyond his depth. For at this time, men were becoming conscious of their vast possibilities. Marlowe's hero is a man who tried to sway "all things that move between the quiet poles." Instead of finding the triumph he had hoped, he came into conflict with moral laws, and was carried off to hell.

These treatments of the problem of evil from the early Greek through Hebrew, Roman, medieval, and early Renaissance drama were in the cultural traditions of the English people, and it is probable that these ideas were circulating during the time of Shakespeare.

Among other historical influences affecting the Shakespearean drama, one must mention the appetite of the Elizabethans for melodrama and their interest in the tragedy of blood. Dozens of pamphlets of the time have been preserved, narrating in journalistic style the latest murders. There was such a public interest in crime that one person of the times was moved to write:

> It is indeed as if one attained or held honours by murders, treasons, adulteries, thefts, lies and the like; or by slobering them ouer, as som write of the smothered murder of Marques Hambleton and others.[13]

The Englishman who attended public executions for amusement was used to the sight of blood and demanded it on the stage. He was keenly

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13 F. T. Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940, p. 16.

interested in murders for any other motive than simple robbery. Murder to expedite a theft was easy to understand, but murder for other reasons excited the curiosity of the Elizabethan audience. This partially accounts for the popularity of the "tragedy of blood," a play which displayed the external characteristics of violence and bloodshed. It might have blood-revenge as the central tragic theme, or it might be linked to this classification only by its gratification of the desire for sensationalism.[14] The picture of evil is generally lurid, even thrilling, but the concept is presented with little ethical subtlety.

Against this background of the drama, from the Greek profundities to the Renaissance thrill of melodramatic crime, a study of Shakespeare's philosophy concerning evil as it appears in certain of the plays is particularly valuable in that it deals with a problem that has vital and constant appeal, a problem that each generation tries to solve in the light of its own experiences; it throws a light on the creative genius of Shakespeare; and it sharpens our observations and broadens our understanding of human nature and the world at large.

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14 Op. cit., p. 75.

CHAPTER II

INDIVIDUAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS OF EVIL

In Shakespeare's time, men considered evil to be both subjective and objective. It manifested itself subjectively in the spirits of men, and objectively in a world whose existence depended in no degree upon the activities of the human mind.[1] Likewise, Shakespeare sees evil in these modes, revealing it to us in both its individual and environmental aspects. He pictures evil as it issues from character, from environment, shows how its forces operate, and traces its tragic consequences. Evil exists in the individual who does not recognize moral obligations and who is excessively egoistic, and it exists even in a noble person who has some flaw in his character. Evil often tends to ally itself with exceptional powers of will and intellect which can spread misery and destruction around them.

Shakespeare represents powers auxiliary to vice outside the individual. The history of the race, family life, and state and economic conditions have created forces of good and evil which are independent of the will of the individual. But man must move through the world subject to these accumulated forces. Sometimes he comes in contact with the virtuous force which influences for good, but oftentimes, he comes into contact with evil forces which bring evil consequences. Sometimes the pressure of the outward forces and the sway of accident are so great that they are almost more than man can endure. But man contributes in some measure to the disaster which befalls him.

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[1] W. C. Curry, Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1937, p. 58.

Calamities do not just happen to men; they proceed from men's actions.

According to Shakespeare, there are causes of evil to be found in the individual. One of the primary sources is a devotion to a natural appetite which does not recognize moral obligations. Edmund, in King Lear, is a product and follower of nature. He had come into the world because of his father's natural appetite, and biological law holds no compact with right and wrong. From the beginning, Edmund is never allowed to forget the circumstances of his birth. In the presence of the Earl of Kent, his father makes light of Edmund's illegitimacy; he confesses he has blushed to acknowledge him and that he has sent him away these nine years to avoid the embarrassment of his presence; and he compares him unfavorably with the other son. The social order in which Edmund finds himself with its "plague of custom" and its "curiosity of nations" has offered him no place but of shame. Nature has given him intelligence, gainly physical dimensions, and the blood of aristocracy. She has made no distinction between legitimate and bastard. So, he turns from a world governed by the laws of convention to a world governed by the laws of nature.

> Thou Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound.[2]

Edmund, however, well illustrates evil which results from an attempt to disturb the social order which God has ordained and has made manifest in the conditions of birth. He is illegitimate, but he tries to get the advantages of legitimacy. When he rises out of his

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[2] Shakespeare, King Lear, I, ii, -12.

sphere, he sets evil forces in motion. The evil which results from Macbeth's ambition and Julius Caesar's acceptance of the crown has an added significance when viewed in the light of this concept.[3]

Unhampered by any moral law that would breed conscience or tender feeling, Edmund can give his full energy to whatever he wills. He can use any means, even to the taking of life, to further his ends. Although his victims seem weak and defenseless, Edmund's success is due partly to the fact that they are human and lack the individual energy of the beast. Edmund and his evil associates are repeatedly compared to animals, especially beasts of prey like the fox and lion. Goneril's visage is wolfish, her cruelty has the fangs of a bear. She and Regan are tigers, each is an adder to the other. It is interesting to note that Shakespeare finds none of man's better qualities in the world of the brute, and yet, when brute qualities appear in man who has the "brains to forge, tongues to speak, and hands to act," they are capable of enormities which no mere brute can conceive or execute.[4] Edmund is this kind of man. His own natural desires and abilities are his highest laws. Stripped of sentimentality, religious scruples, and any feeling akin to goodness, he makes the most of what nature has bestowed upon him.

Also highly intellectual and acting without the bounds of a moral order, Iago, in Othello, illustrates most nearly another of Shakespeare's

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[3] John W. Draper, "Political Themes in Shakespeare's Later Plays," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, XXXV (1936), 61ff.

[4] A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy. London: Macmillan and Company, 1929, pp. 266-268.

concepts of the causes of evil to be found within the individual: that of egoism. Through his observations of human beings, most of whom have not learned to "love themselves," Iago comes to a realization of "his price," and when he does not prosper like these simple, generous souls he has seen, he feels the necessity for proving his superiority to them in any way he can. His intelligence opens the way. He must prove himself to be master of those whose nobility he despises; he must assert his intelligence and prove by his control of others' fates that he is their superior.

Iago's soliloquies show his extraordinary intellectual skill in setting out on a project, brooding over the plot, making an outline, and gradually seeing it take shape as he works at it. The speech in which he preaches patience to Roderigo is characteristic of his love of action. He can hardly wait for the stupid fellow to leave, for he finds the time getting short and he is impatient to be in action.

> By the mass, 'tis morning;
> Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.[5]

Iago exults more when all his physical powers are at a strain and he is experiencing the joy of creation. He will plan carefully and act quickly when the time comes. The more difficult the action, the more exciting it is to Iago, for the difficulty heightens his sense of superiority and power. Although he is aided by good fortune, his success prevails largely because of his daring and skill. He prefers a precarious position from which one slip would mean his death.

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5 Othello, III, iv, 45-46.

> Work on.
> My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught;[6]

Now he is master of the general who has failed to promote him. He has proved himself superior to what other men deem best. Thus, we see evil in Iago generated from egoism.

In addition to this kind of excess, Shakespeare recognizes others which are not necessarily connected with evil characters, but even with so-called good people whose actions have evil consequences. In almost all Shakespeare's tragic characters, there is a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in one particular direction. The trait, while it may be an error of action or of omission, sets in motion other forces and brings on ruin. An innocent hero may show some excess of virtue, which consequently is a vice: such as pride, and excess of credulousness, or excessive simplicity. These defects are certainly evil and contribute decisively to his catastrophe.[7]

Ordinarily, for example, reasoning is a virtue; but in Hamlet Shakespeare shows this virtue of "god-like reason" carried to excess so that it becomes a vice. Hamlet's fault is "thinking too precisely on event."

> A thought, which quarter'd hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward, . . .
> Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do;'[8]

He is not a physical coward; he is not afraid to kill the king, for when the necessity arises, he acquits himself bravely as in the

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6 Othello, III, iv, 45-46.

7 Bradley, op. cit., pp. 20-35.

8 Hamlet, IV, v, 41-44.

encounter with the pirates. He knows he should avenge his father; his path of duty is clear in accord with the moral code of his time; but there is a hindrance to his action, something deep within him which makes him hesitate to commit a deed morally defensible but intellectually questionable. He has great anxiety to do right. He is anxious that people understand his motives in order to leave a good name behind him. Keenly conscious of his responsibility, which is repulsive to a man of honor, and intellectually enlightened and emotionally sensitive, he is disgusted with life and everything in it.

> The time is out of joint! O cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right![9]

He is set in a position which wrenches his whole moral outlook.

After Ophelia's death, Hamlet expresses a belief, and Horatio agrees, that perhaps his greatest fault is acting against what the fates have prepared, revealed through his intuition. If he had acted on his first thought, how different the outcome would have been!

> Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well
> When deep plots do pall; and that should teach us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends
> Rough-hew them how we will.[10]

Because he ponders over scruples too fine, Hamlet is forced into evil actions he never dreamed of, to warp and destroy the lives of those about him. He would never purposely have killed Polonius, delivered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the hangman, and sent Ophelia to the grave. So we see the evil in Hamlet coming not from an evil nature,

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[9] Ibid., I, v, 188-189.

[10] Ibid., V, ii, 8-11.

but from so great an anxiety to do right that he becomes too scrupulous and consequently scatters death and destruction around him.

There is a close resemblance between the character of Hamlet and the character of Brutus. Brutus has that same delicate reflective nature wracked by doubts and uncertainties in an effort to do right. He is bent on acting with every consideration, obeying only the dictates of duty. Yet it is his sense of goodness, however misguided, that sets evil forces in motion and allows them to continue. He is not boastful as he gives us this picture of himself.

> There is no terror, Cassius, in your threats;
> For I am arm'd so strong in honesty
> That they pass me by as the idle wind,
> Which I respect not.[11]

When Cassius urges him to place himself at the head of a conspiracy against his friends, he consents out of noble, disinterested, and patriotic motives. No one could mean better than Brutus. He does not care to impose an oath on fellow conspirators, and insists that his plans be furthered without secrecy or violence. His two line summary,

> My heart doth joy that yet in all my life,
> I found no man but he was true to me,[12]

is the height of stupidity. When Brutus meets Antony after the assassination, he assures him of his "kind love, good thoughts, and reverence." He cannot suspect him. The trust that he places in mankind is so great as to be impractical.

Cassio and Casca are wise enough to know that any appeal they make to Brutus must be through his nobility; they frankly admit that they

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[11] Julius Caesar, IV, iii, 66-70.

[12] Ibid., V, iii, 33-36.

can work only behind a mask of good.

> Oh! he sits high in all the people's hearts;
> And that which would appear offense in us,
> His countenance, like richest alchemy,
> Will change to virtue and to worthiness.[13]

Brutus, then, illustrates evil coming from a character of high moral principles which lead him to underestimate the potential evil and selfish motives of others and bring destruction to his own noble character and chaos to the state.

We have seen how evil may come from a devotion to a natural appetite and from egoism, or from goodness that blinds a man to the faults of others. But all the causes of evil are not to be found in the individual. Some may be found in environment. For instance, the tragedy of Othello may be traced, not to evil in his own character alone, but partly to the evil in his surroundings.

It is the noble character of Othello with which Desdemona has fallen in love.

> My parts, my title, and my perfect soul
> Shall manifest me rightly.[14]

On first thought, the statement sounds convincing to the reader, too. Yet Othello's mind is not wholly free from baser qualities, or Iago could not find such ready response to his evil suggestions. Othello is not the intellectual man; he had no faculty for inquiry into complex facts. His speeches sound noble, but they do not show a mind that is observant, quick-witted, or shrewd. Othello has grown up among barbarians, and later has lived among seamen and rough soldiers.

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[13] Ibid., I, iii, 151-161.

[14] Othello, I, ii, 30-31.

He must have overheard lewd tales and jests, and probably took their ribaldry as a matter of course. For his nobility lies in a broader field. It has to do with bravery in battle, fair treatment of his soldiers, service to the state, and an exalted moral idealism. He has had nothing in his experience which has prepared him to depend on the kind of loyalty of which Desdemona is capable, though he pins all his faith in the universe on the ideal she actually embodies. He still marvels that from all the world, she has chosen him, and so, when Iago presents the possibility of her unfaithfulness, Othello accepts it with less difficulty than if he had been fostered in a different environment. The flood of jealousy that gradually rises and sweeps away Othello's self-control is due in a greater degree to the skill and good fortune of Iago. Notice how quick he is to make use of every action of Cassio and Desdemona, however innocent, to turn it for his evil purposes. Working in the full knowledge of the stops of Othello's nature, when

> . . . trifles light as air
> Are to the jealous confirmations strong
> As proofs of holy writ;[15]

he so often catches upon the last words of Othello to further his jealousy and to make the suggestion seem Othello's own, as:

> Othello. Is he not honest?
> Iago. Honest, my lord?
> Othello. Honest! ay, honest.
> Iago. My lord, for aught I know.
> Othello. What dost thou think?
> Iago. Think, my lord![16]

Othello has every reason to believe in Iago, he has always found him honest and dependable. If Desdemona deceived her father, she might

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[15] Ibid., III, iii, 23-26.

[16] Ibid., III, iii, 102-108.

also deceive Othello; after all, Othello knew very little about her before marriage. Cassio has stolen away from Desdemona guilty-like; there must be something between them that is shameful. It is likely that Cassio is not honest; and since he is not honest, he is guilty of any base action that Iago chooses to suggest. Because he knows Iago speaks some truths, Othello more readily takes every gross suggestion, translates it immediately into fact, and in his imagination makes even more vivid the pictures of lust that Iago paints for him. Then the evil consequences in Othello are the result of jealousy for which environment is mainly responsible.

Another kind of environmental evil which Shakespeare notices is caused by an inherent condition in the social, political, or economic systems. The tragedy of Coriolanus is due to the existing social conditions as well as his pride. At the beginning of the play, the political state is in confusion. There is hatred between the two political leaders, Aufidius and Coriolanus. There have been expensive wars. The mutinous rabble are gathered with staves and clubs in anger against the patricians. And, indeed, the tribunes are represented as dishonest demagogues:

> They suffer us to famish, and their storehouses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any wholesome act against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love thy bear us.[17]

An additional social evil, the prejudices of class, affects Coriolanus. He is naturally a man of deep feeling, tender-hearted, and generous,

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17 Coriolanus, I, i, 83-91.

but he is held fast in the aristocratic tradition. He cannot extend his sympathies beyond his class. He cannot flatter the mob as they would like. His personal weakness clashes with social conditions. For this, he has to suffer banishment from Rome and his subsequent fate.

Just as the environmental factors are shown to produce evil, they are also represented as collaborating with evil in its course. According to a medieval system of metaphysics, in which many men of the Renaissance believed, evil spirits had control over the primary elements of nature. Their manifestations did not come through vague and irrational forces, but through malignant wills of intelligences, evil spirits, and devils who had the ability to project their power into the workings of nature and influence the human spirit.[18] During this time, it was also assumed that correspondences existed between the spiritual universe and the material universe.[19] In Shakespeare there is evidence that the physical forces of the universe and supernatural malice are sympathetic with human guilt. For example, the evil in Macbeth is not wholly restricted to purely human agencies. The witches strike the keynote. They appear in a desert place, barren and blasted, where evil has obtained the mastery of things. The storm which rages over Macbeth's castle, we may reasonably suppose, is caused by demoniac power. A strange atmosphere hangs over the countryside, a darkness blots out the stars, the night is so unruly that chimneys are blown

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18 Curry, op. cit., pp. 58-61.

19 Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass. New York: Oxford University Press, 1936, pp. 12-13.

down, strange screams of death are heard in the air, and even the firm-set earth shakes. The Old Man has never experienced such dreadful occurrences as the night brings. The sailor is tempest tossed, the owl clamors, the horses devour each other, and the ravens croak. All these manifestations intensify the feeling that nature is joined in some terrible league with evil. Likewise, in Lear, the storm in the natural world is closely linked with the disorder and confusion in the ethical world. Kent has never seen such "sheets of fire," or heard "such bursts of horrid thunder, such groans of roaring wind and rain." They seem to be reflections of Lear's tormented soul. They are the "servile ministers" of darkness. The answer of the breaking storm to Lear's appeal to the gods is no accident:

> You see me here, you gods, a poor old man
> As full of grief as age; wretched in both![20]

The night, the storms, the houselessness, Gloucester with his eyes put out, are all bound by a strange kind of sympathy, a confusion of the elements of nature. Human life is involved in darkness and conflicting with wild powers let loose to rage in the world. It seems to Lear that even the lowest things in creation have turned against him. All nature seems to be in a conspiracy, and the most trivial and insignificant creatures are the most striking proofs of its malignity and its extent. The wild raging of the elements is joined with human outrage and violence to persecute the helpless, unresisting, almost unoffending sufferer.

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20 Lear, III, iv, 276-277.

Shakespeare goes further in his conception of outside forces sympathetic with evil to show them taking a definite hand in the furthering of evil deeds. Although Iago is intellectual, his good fortune is so extraordinary that there must be a certain correspondence between him and his environment. It seems that he is aided at every step by fortunate accidents and the stupid mistakes of his victims. Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the moment most favorable to him, Bianca arrives at a moment opportune to complete Othello's deception and incense his anger, Cassio finds Othello in a swoon, and as Othello listens, Cassio unfortunately never speaks the name of Bianca as he recites his experiences with her. The influence of accident is so great that it seems that Fate has taken a hand with villainy.

Enjoying a like continued success of good fortune in his path of evil is Richard III, whose progress is due in a greater measure than Iago to intellectual superiority and strength of will. He depends entirely upon himself. Because of his poverty of feeling and conscience, he has a greater vigor of will to become the villain he plans to be. He allows nothing to reach his feeling, and therefore, nothing impairs his intellect. He avoids caution, his preference is for feats that seem impossible. Confident in his intellectual power, he finds no obstacle too daring to be acted upon. He will pause at nothing to achieve a purpose. He is prompt in decisions, attends to the principal point only, and then acts instantly.

Richard is not afraid because he feels secure in his knowledge of human nature. He knows good men do not ordinarily suspect evil,

that they are simple gulls; consequently he makes them his instruments:

> The secret mischiefs that I set abroach
> I lay unto the grievous charge of others.[21]

He is such a skillful speaker and artful player upon the stops of mankind that he can win Queen Elizabeth after he has killed her children, and Anne, after he has murdered her king.

Richard's great intellectual superiority is shown not only in his discernment of character and expert management of stupid, good people, but in his artful contrivance in forming projects. Within a short time, he sets Clarence and the king in deadly hate "the one against the other," plans to kill them both, and to marry the widow of one of his victims. He frames his face to fit all occasions, conceals his intentions with dexterity, and prudently gives way to no feeling. He quickly sees every opportunity for his ends and takes advantage of it. In Richard III, evil has allied herself with exceptional powers of will and intellect, and has allowed him to prosper.

In addition to allowing its chosen ministers to prosper, it is the nature of evil to give them the power to spread misery and destruction about them. In Lear, Edmund and the two monster sisters who own the most impressive forms of power: courage, intellect, and strength of will, are able to generate terrible evil in profusion. Regan and Cornwall have a perfect, even monstrous sympathy. Pure horror reigns about them. Regan's ill-treatment of Lear is to be only the beginning.

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21 Richard III, I, iii, 325-326.

She plans to possess the whole kingdom; betroths herself to Edmund, her husband still living; plots against her husband's life, and exults in his death. She and Goneril are satisfied only with the complete success of evil. They will allow no good. The treachery of Edmund and the torture to which Gloucester is subjected add to the picture of great suffering.

But it is an added truth that tyranny is self-destructive and annihilation cannot maintain anything, even its own existence. We have the feeling throughout Lear that evil, in spite of its apparent success, has no long career. It has set evil beings at enmity, for the course of evil is fatal to all of them. The same principles which united the two sisters against their father turn them against each other. When the faithless of both families come together, how can they be faithful to one another? The jealousy of the two sisters leads to a conspiracy and their final destruction. Edmund is faithless to both, and has to fall. It is true that the good perish: Kent in his loyalty, and Cordelia in her redeeming love. For inevitably, the destruction of evil brings the destruction of good. But on the other hand, evil results in good. There is an interaction. The latent goodness of Albany is made active by the evil in Goneril, and only through suffering can Lear know the meaning of love. Shakespeare does not allow villainy to remain victorious and prosperous to the last. When evil masters the good and has its way, it destroys other people, but it also destroys itself.

In the character of Macbeth, it is easy to see the major successive steps in deterioration of a man who has given himself over to evil. A whole flood of vices follow which ultimately destroy him.

In the beginning of the play, Macbeth is clearly not ethically noble. He is already in alliance with the powers of evil. The appearance of the witches is the confirmation of his evil ideas. The evil tentacles have begun to wind around Macbeth. Lady Macbeth, already knowing his desires and sharing his ambition, steels him to the murder of Duncan. Once having stepped on the downward path, Macbeth finds resistance more difficult. Now he sees a danger in the living Banquo. He plans and carries out his murder. But after Fleance escapes, he never ceases to be "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd;" he is caught in the net. Crime follows crime, and still the voices of the sisters lure him on. Now they warn him to beware of Macduff and encourage him to think he can be "bold, bloody, and resolute" with impunity. The Birnam Wood prophecy lifts his confidence to a greater height. Then a world not wholly of his own making closes about him:

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.[22]

He expresses the fatigue of a soul who has worn himself out wading in blood and finding a necessity for new murders which he has no pleasure in committing. The powers of evil in which he has trusted have turned against him and betrayed him. His death is without honor or loveliness. His villainy once set in motion is never at a stop. Crime leads to more crimes and at last terminates in his ruin.

Thus, the source of evil can be traced both to the individual and his environment. It issues from evil individuals who are egotistical enough to stand without the bounds of the moral code, or it issues from

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22 Macbeth, III, iv, 136-138.

noble individuals whose goodness causes them to overlook some flaw in their character or conduct. Evil also issues from environment, but when it does so, it finds support in certain inner conditions in the life of man. It is the nature of evil to ally itself with exceptional powers of will and intellect so that it may more easily spread destruction. When once an individual gives himself to a course of evil, he has no control over the vices which inevitably follow and destroy him. Parallel to this idea is another, that as evil destroys good, it also destroys itself and results in good.

CHAPTER III

SIGNIFICANT VARIATIONS IN SHAKESPEARE'S THOUGHT

In any treatment of the progression of Shakespeare's thought through a study of the plays in chronological order, two points of caution must be kept in mind: first, that the dates of the plays and order in which they were written cannot be ascertained beyond question; and second, that the chronological succession may reflect a catering to public taste instead of a variation or growth in Shakespeare's ideas.

Four main divisions, each fairly distinctive, are generally recognized in the chronology of Shakespeare's plays. The following table, which agrees in the main with the order of Edward Dowden and Dover Wilson, shows the approximate dates of composition which have been assigned with reasonable certainty in the light of evidence available.[1]

Comedies	Histories	Tragedies
Comedy of Errors 1591-1592	1 Henry VI)	Titus Andronicus 1591-92
	2 Henry VI) 1590-1592	
Two Gentlemen 1592	3 Henry VI)	
	Richard III 1593	
Love's Labour's Lost 1594	King John 1594	
Midsummer Night's Dream 1595	Richard II 1595	Romeo and Juliet 1595
Merchant of Venice 1596		
Taming of the Shrew 1596		
Much Ado 1598-1599	1 Henry IV 1597	
As You Like It 1599-1600	2 Henry IV 1598	
Merry Wives 1599-1600	Henry V 1599	Julius Caesar 1599
Twelfth Night 1600-1601		
Troilus and Cressida 1602		Hamlet 1601-1602
All's Well 1602		Othello 1604
		King Lear 1605-1606
Measure for Measure 1604		Macbeth 1606
		Timon of Athens 1607
		Antony and Cleopatra 1607
Pericles 1607-08		Coriolanus 1608-09
Cymbeline 1610		
Winter's Tale 1611		
Tempest 1611	Henry VIII 1613	

[1] William A. Neilson, and Charles J. Hill, Introduction to The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare (Revised Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942, p. 14.

When parallelisms to Shakespeare's concepts appear in other dramas of the time, it might be assumed that these ideas were common property and were introduced into Shakespeare's dramas for popular appeal. For if Shakespeare catered to the public taste in the historical plays and in the tragedies of blood, and in such specific dramatic elements as ghosts and witches, he might also have used moral and philosophical ideas that would appeal to at least the most intelligent members of his audience. The fact that the moralities continued to be acted through Shakespeare's time is evidence of Englishmen's interest in philosophical problems.

During Shakespeare's time, much new learning came into literary use. Other dramas besides Shakespeare's were reflecting an interest in the psychological doctrine of the passions in all phases of life. In The Misfortunes of Arthur by Thomas Hughes, produced about 1587, Arthur fails because he rejects reason and yields to rage; while Modred, who is guided by reason, succeeds in his evil purpose. About 1601, Chapman, revealing his Bussy as the tragic victim of his own passion, expresses a dominant psychological theory of Renaissance tragedy; namely, that a hero's strength may become the source of his weakness and the cause of his overthrow.[2]

At the same time, there was in circulation the idea that those who possess unusual knowledge may use, direct, and control the rest of society by tricks of flattery and deceit. Lorenzo, in The Spanish Tragedy, is the first of a long line of Machiavellian villains who,

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[2] Hardin Craig, "The Ethics of Jacobean Drama: The Case of Chapman," Parrott Presentation Volume. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1935, pp. 25-46.

utterly soulless and heartless, could control innocent people to their ends, and if necessary, could meet their own fates with egotistical composure. Traces of these same conceptions are evident in Richard III and later in some of the major tragedies.[3]

One of the strongest influences in forming public taste in English tragedy, although it was adapted to national uses and traditions, was the Senecan tragedy of blood. Classical tragedy had gained enormous prestige in England because of the great value set on classical learning; and because the Elizabethans knew little directly of the Greeks, they came to regard Seneca as one of the most perfect of ancient writers. Seneca was read freely in the schools and universities. Because of the Renaissance interest in the possibilities of human development, Englishmen were well equipped to understand his philosophy, which held that man, the individual, was more than a puppet of fortune or the fates, and was to some extent the master of his fate. Seneca's emphasis on sensationalism, on physical horrors to stimulate emotion, appealed to the English taste, for blood and horror on the stage could hardly offend the sensibilities of spectators who were accustomed to the cruel public executions of Elizabethan London.[4] Although Kyd goes beyond Seneca in ethics and in incident, having the additional advantage of knowing Italian and French stories, and being influenced by contemporary English ideas about the Italian character, The Spanish Tragedy, produced in 1597, is fashioned much in the Senecan manner. The Jew of Malta, Titus Andronicus,

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[3] C. Tucker Brooke, The Tudor Drama. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911, pp. 209-222.

[4] F. T. Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, p. 75.

and Hamlet are all its direct descendants in that a great part of their success depends on the presentation of sensational action. Although lacking many Senecan elements, Romeo and Juliet belongs to the progeny of the Senecan tragedy. It has the root idea of a family feud, the violent nature of action, the tremendous effusion of blood.[5]

The fact that at the time Shakespeare was writing a certain type of play, other dramatists were preferring that same type, might be another indication that Shakespeare was following the bent of his times.

At the close of the Tudor period, the English equivalent of the Senecan melodrama had taken its hold on audiences and was appealing to dramatists later than Kyd. Marlowe was writing his Jew of Malta in 1590, and Shakespeare was reshaping Titus Andronicus about 1591.[6]

While Shakespeare was employed with the comedies, principally from 1595 to 1601, Chapman, Jonson, and Dekker were also writing comedy. Chapman's Blind Beggar appeared in 1596 and his Humorous Day's Mirth in 1597. Dekker's Satiromastix and Jonson's Poetaster and Every Man in His Humor were produced between the dates of 1598 and 1601.[7]

From 1601 to 1610, other great dramatists besides Shakespeare were attracted to tragedy. Cyril Tourneur wrote The Revenger's Tragedy, usually dated 1606-1607, and The Atheist's Tragedy, dated 1607-1611; Fletcher wrote his Valentinian in 1610; Chapman wrote his

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5 F. T. Bowers, op. cit., p. 75.

6 C. Tucker Brooke, op. cit., passim.

7 Ibid.

Bussy D' Ambois, 1601, Conspiracy and the Tragedy of Charles, Duke of Byron, 1608, and the Revenge of Bussy, 1611; Webster wrote The White Devil, 1609-1612,[8] and the Duchess of Malfi about 1610.[9]

Shakespeare's changing from one type of play to another might be partially attributed to the demands of the court. For instance, it is thought that his turn from tragedy to romance was made to suit the taste of the Jacobean Court, more and more given over to sentiment and spectacle. This may have been reinforced by the tradition which had been established at the Blackfriars by the Children of the Revels, a theater and company finally absorbed by Shakespeare's organization, the King's Men. Music naturally had an important place in the performance of the singing boys. It is also probable that the King's Men, whose senior sharers were now advanced in years, welcomed plays that gave more scope and work to the younger actors, and Shakespeare, by planning his Romances, may have been deliberately turning to account special talent then at the disposal of the organization.[10]

J. Dover Wilson[11] believes that some of Shakespeare's plays have points of contact with Essex, who was the leader of the political group with whom Shakespeare must have been sympathetic since the Earl of Southampton was also a member of the party and a close friend of Essex.

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8 Ibid.

9 J. Q. Adams, A Life of William Shakespeare. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1923, p. 313.

10 Peter Alexander, Shakespeare's Life and Art. London: James Nisbet and Company, 1939, pp. 200-201.

11 J. Dover Wilson, The Essential Shakespeare. London: Cambridge University Press, 1935, pp. 96-107.

The Southampton group had vested their hopes in Essex as a successor to Queen Elizabeth. Although he was the most popular man in England, he was moody and impetuous, given to violent outbursts of temper, and in general, emotionally unstable.

As early as 1596, in the Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare undertook to warn Essex of the dangers of violence and ruthlessness. Two years before, Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Jewish physician, who had gained the distinction of serving the Queen, was hanged on a charge of treason. Many people believed him innocent and the victim of the earl's jealousy. It seems probable that the play contains a hint to Essex to beware of violence, especially in the speech of Portia on the quality of mercy.[12]

In 1599, when Henry V was written, Queen Elizabeth was sixty-six and had no heir. All Essex needed was her favor and her "voice." The play is not a picture of Essex, but an appeal to him to become like Henry V.[13]

Although the text of Hamlet as we now have it dates after Essex's death, we may suppose it is Shakespeare's revelation to his contemporaries of one of the most puzzling characters of the time. Hamlet is a man full of faults but full of much nobility. His piety, his bravery, his intellectual virtues, his touch of insanity, all point to a portraiture of Essex.

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12 William Allan Neilson, editor, op. cit., p. 115.

13 J. Dover Wilson, op. cit., p. 96.

In Henry IV, Henry V, and Julius Caesar, Shakespeare was taking advantage of the development of national consciousness and the growth of interest in political history. These three plays form a closely connected series presenting a theory of a king's responsibility to his subjects by means of the character evolution of the national leader. Henry IV traces the gradual development in the young prince of the ideals of kingly service, justice, and patriotic fervor which Shakespeare demanded from the ideal monarch. Henry V pictures the enormous possibilities of personal glory and national service in reach of the ruler who can perform his duties bravely and thoroughly. Julius Caesar shows that every effort to achieve law and order by lawless means must end in futility.

There is some suggestion that King Lear was written as the result of King James' idea urging the study of English history to see the evils which may come from a divided kingdom since King Lear takes place in early Britain and the tragedy results from a division of the kingdom. It may be significant, too, that the kingdom of Lear was finally united under the Duke of Albany, when we know that King James held the title of the Duke of Albany.[14]

This consideration, that Shakespeare's plays show evidence of reflecting public taste, both in the use of contemporary incident and in the use of themes popular with other dramatists of the day, should serve to guard us against supporting any argument that his plays necessarily reflect the joys and sorrows in Shakespeare's soul.

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14 John W. Draper, "The Occasion of King Lear," Studies in Philology, XXIV, 1937, p. 176.

However, in spite of these facts of Tudor and Jacobean dramatic history, certain editors, principally Dowden and Wilson, have seen a definite progression of Shakespeare's thought through a chronological arrangement of groups of plays.

Mr. Wilson sees in the plays evidence of Shakespeare's spiritual development in relation to the spiritual conditions of the time in which he lived.[15] In doing so, he frames some general conceptions of what he takes to be Shakespeare's spirit and personality, for the most part from what other poets and artists have thought about him. He introduces his discussion of the progression in Shakespeare's thinking with a quotation from Keats: "Shakespeare led a life of allegory; his works are the comments on it."

Mr. Dowden comes to a conclusion in the matter of progression by tracing the growth of Shakespeare's mind and art through the plays. He finds that Shakespeare's power of thought increased steadily as the years went by, and his emotions, by contact with the world, became swifter and more voluminous. As Shakespeare penetrated further into the actual facts of life, he found more in those facts to "rouse and kindle and sustain the heart"; he discovered "more awful and mysterious darkness, and also more intense and lovelier light." In the end, he obtained serene possession of himself and could "accept all things not understood."[16]

Thus a progression of ideas in Shakespeare's plays may be due to a growth in Shakespeare's spiritual life provoked by pressing events

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15 J. Dover Wilson, op. cit., pp. 92-145.

16 Edward Dowden, Shakespeare, His Mind and Art. New York: Harpers, 1918, pp. 39-40.

around him, or a growth in his mind and art. In my study of Shakespeare's plays with particular reference to the problem of evil, it seems possible that a certain progress of ideas is discernible according to the chronology found near the beginning of this chapter. There are plays from each of the four groups which are indicative of significant variations with respect to the treatment of evil within the plays, namely: Richard III, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Timon, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, and The Tempest.

Shakespeare's historical plays deal with man in a positive social world, his sources of power and weakness, his success and failure. They are concerned more with action, with what a man has done, rather than what he has thought and suffered. They do not measure a man from within, but from the consequences of his action. Their depiction of evil is without the mystery and darkness of the tragedies. In the historical plays, evil simply expresses itself in bad deeds issuing from an evil character. It can be subdued only at the expense of much of the virtuous force in the world. All through the historical plays, there is a pretty low estimate of human nature. There are few good characters among them. Since the monarch was considered all important in the scheme of social stability, and the security of England depended on a king with a clear title who could identify himself fully with his people, most of the chaos in the historical plays is due either to a weakness of title, or to the evil character of the king. Even Henry IV and his famous son suffer because of the violent and illegitimate manner by which Henry IV obtained the crown.

The only external evidence for the date of Richard III, one of the early histories, is the publication of the First Quarto in 1597. The marks of Shakespeare's early style, and especially of the influence of Marlowe, are so pronounced as to have led to a general agreement that the play was composed some years before that date, probably about 1593.[17] A study of this play reveals evil through the actions of a man who has done wrong and has to suffer for it. Richard fails because he tries to invert the moral order. Throughout the play, his deeds are cited as inhuman and unnatural. He himself is a kind of devil outside the realm of humanity, and therefore, not an ordinary criminal. His force has nothing moral in it. Like Iago, he is not moved by ambition so much as by the feeling that he must let loose upon the world the resources of his will. But Richard has no troubles of conscience. He is not conceived from a world of feeling and thought; he is conceived from a world of action. He is diabolical when the play opens. We follow his movements chiefly to marvel at his successes. But it is significant that he dies on Richmond's sword. Perhaps in this play, Shakespeare means to say that disruption in the state makes Richard III possible. Edward IV had lived carelessly in luxury, with more concern for his personal comfort than for the state. There is no likelihood that those left behind will "continue this united league," or that brother Gloucester will "keep the blessed period of peace." Henry VI is of the same feeble type that is a curse to the throne of England. He is not aggressive for virtue or against vice.

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17 William Allan Neilson, editor, op. cit., p. 857.

Near in thought and chronology to this treatment of evil coming from confusion in the state is Romeo and Juliet in which death is a consequence of confusion in family life, a feud between two ancient houses. Because of its pervasive lyrical impulse, a proper date for the play would seem to be 1595, which would associate it with all the plays in which lyricism is a marked feature.[18] The first scene presents the moral environment, the strife between the houses of Capulet and Montague, which affects even the actions and lives of the serving men. Although there are many references to a strange foreboding, to the stars, to fate, and to the hostility of Fortune, and although the element of accident plays a great part in the tragedy, yet the "ancient grudge" causes the death of Mercutio and Tybalt, puts obstacles in the way of Romeo and Juliet's happiness, and indirectly causes their death and the death of Paris. There is some indication that Shakespeare is interested in the inner man when he deals with the excess of feeling in Romeo and Juliet, but in his treatment of evil he is primarily concerned with environment.

In Julius Caesar, composed four years later than Romeo and Juliet,[19] Shakespeare is becoming more interested in the subjective aspects of the problem of evil. He now treats prosperity or adversity in the material world as a secondary matter. He shows us a man whose nobility has so numbed him that he cannot see his own weaknesses or the

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18 William Allan Neilson, editor, op. cit., p. 974.

19 Ibid., p. 1012.

faults of others. He is studious of self-perfection and unwilling that his character should have a stain. His principles are beautiful, but he errs when he fails to recognize the power of Caesar's spirit and when he ignores the possibility of Antony's irony and its effect on the mob. But through all these errors, Brutus is somewhat admirable because he retains his moral integrity to the end. Caesar causes his own tragedy, too, when he permits his ambition and pride to obscure his judgments of men. That he was capable of shrewd judgments is shown by his estimate of Cassius and of Antony.

Julius Caesar shows an interest in the individual, in his weakness of character; but because Brutus acts and speaks as a public man, the depths of his soul are not exposed. Nevertheless, he is a step in the direction of Hamlet, in which the study of evil is both individual and environmental. The date of the composition of this play is conjectural. The first surviving notice of Hamlet is an entry in the Stationer's Register, July 26, 1602, but since Harvey mentioned seeing the play while Essex was still alive, and since the death of Essex occurred in 1601, late 1600 or early 1601 is likely.[20]

Since no person is independent of the society in which he lives, the destruction which he wreaks may be traceable, in part, to his environment. Hamlet has been led to believe in a world that nourishes men "noble in reason, infinite in faculty, admirable in form and moving," and after his father's death, he has to face a society of evil, a Denmark that is rotten, a "vice of kings" on the throne. His own

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20 Ibid., p. 1040.

mother is guilty of incest, the woman he loves allied with fraud. No wonder his idealism is blasted. If men in Denmark had been living under Hamlet's ideals of honest and forthright action, he could have met them on equal ground; but when he decides to act as the occasion demands, because of his moral revulsions, he finds it impossible to move. He feels called upon to mold a moral order from a world of confusion. In longing for sincerity and truth, he thinks too much, but there is also a fault in his excess of feeling. Had he been able to restrain himself, he would not have assumed madness or provoked Ophelia to fatal grief. In Hamlet the forces of evil are active and sinister, although the prevailing note is still weakness of character.

In chronology, the tragedy of Othello comes next. There was a performance of the play at Court in November, 1604, and authorities are agreed that the composition belongs to the earlier part of that year.[21] Here Shakespeare is becoming more conscious of the evil in environment and dwells less upon faults of character. Since noble beings are caught in snares from which there is no escape, since evil is aided on every hand by fortunate accident, and the tragedy depends largely on intrigue, the element of fate takes first place in the drama. A man's goodness does not seem to matter so much as the forces which attack him. At times, the struggle between good and evil seems to take place without the presence of a guiding power. Jealousy lets loose a kind of bestial force to make chaos out of human nature. But with all the destruction of goodness, evil suffers defeat and Iago suffers in consequence of his own misdeeds.

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21 Ibid., p. 1093.

The year 1605 or 1606 would seem to be a sound conjecture for the composition of King Lear, since it was performed on December 26, 1606, and in the play, Shakespeare has made reference to eclipses of the sun and moon which occurred in the latter part of 1605.[22] Although the element of environment still carries some responsibility, the evil in Lear is due more to flaw of character. The influence of accident is less. Humanity must take its share of the blame. Lear releases the forces of evil that are always in the world ready to operate. He makes their movement possible through his outburst of passion. Yet, there is a darker side of the picture. What kind of nature is it that will allow such ingratitude of the two sisters, the hatred of Edmund, the blinding of Gloucester, and the torturing of Lear? How can people in whom evil is so complete exist? On the other hand, in Lear's world, there are those who are filled with nobility. Surely, with so much good in it, a universe cannot be wholly victimized by evil. Shakespeare gives us no direct answer but implies it through the attitudes of the important characters near the end of the play. Edmund, whose stand at first is egoism, has at last to recognize moral law. Gloucester is finally willing to accept life as it comes from the hands of the gods. Although Kent believes Fortune presides over the affairs of the world, he is still devoted to right. Edgar's gods always deal out justice, Cordelia calls on her "kind gods," and Lear has experienced a spiritual redemption which he would have gained only through suffering. King Lear is not staged in a universe friendly to evil and hostile to good. Out of all the evil, goodness still stands. In spite of all the unfriendly forces that mete out punishment almost greater than human

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22 Ibid., p. 1136.

beings can bear, man still has a freedom of choice and must bear his responsibility with environment.

Although the evidence for the date of Macbeth is not conclusive, it seems likely that it was composed near the middle or end of 1606, and a recollection of Banquo's ghost in a Beaumont and Fletcher play in 1607 confirms the probability.[23] In this play, Shakespeare is again conscious of evil within the human being. The physical forces of evil are still present in the world, but they do no operate of themselves. As soon as the evil in Macbeth responds to their evil, they exert their force with him as their agent. Macbeth is perfectly free in regard to the witches. He himself never lays the guilt on an external agent. He knows he is to blame. Once more the fate which works in the outer and inner worlds is shown hostile to evil. The "butcher" and his "fiend-like queen" have been destroyed; "the time is free."

Evidence for the date of Timon is inconclusive, but metrical tests, which are less significant than usual on account of the wretched printing of the verse, point to a date between 1605 and 1608. Since there are some striking resemblances between Timon and Lear, 1607 may be regarded as a fair approximation.[24] After the study of Macbeth, who seemingly gave great promise of greatness and nobility, Shakespeare employs himself more earnestly in the faults of character as an index to a man's failure. Timon's fault is a kind of goodness that will not allow him to see evil in the first place. Then, when the selfishness

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23 Ibid., p. 1180.

24 Ibid., p. 1213.

and ingratitude of man is forced upon him, he can find no room for goodness in such a world. He cannot even recognize the faithfulness of his steward. But practical Alcibiades, who deals with the world as it is, is able to assign good and evil to their respective places. Timon fails because he will not oppose the evil in the world. Alcibiades wins because he sets himself in active opposition to those who have wronged him. His method is to use the olive with the sword,

> Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each
> Prescribe to other as each other's leech.[25]

From the moral fault of Timon, Shakespeare proceeds directly to the case of Antony, whose moral fault works his destruction. On May 20, 1608, Edward Blount, one of the publishers of the First Folio, entered in the Stationers' Register "a booke called Anthony and Cleopatra;" so one may reasonably conjecture 1607 as the date of composition.[26] The opening scene shows how far Antony's "dotage" has overflowed the "measure" at the expense of his Roman virtue and manly energy. His prodigality is the talk of the common liar in the streets of Rome. Now the man who has enjoyed all that the world can give in the way of unlimited power and physical pleasures, has given himself over to voluptuousness. The rest of the play is the picture of his gradually sinking away from all that is fine and noble. His fortune goes too. Even when he sees his fate closing in upon him, he will have one more night of pleasure. He has lost his good judgment, he has drowned his consideration. Of course Cleopatra has worked her

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25 Timon, V, iv, 82-85.

26 William Allan Neilson, op. cit., p. 1244.

magic with Antony, but the tragedy is for both of them. When Antony is dead, life holds nothing further for her, and so she too, must die.

Evidence for the date of composition of Coriolanus, although inconclusive, indicates a time late in 1608 or early in 1609.[27] The play is connected not only chronologically but ethically with Antony and Cleopatra. As Antony betrays himself through his indulgence, so does Coriolanus do violence to himself and his country through his haughtiness and his pride. Coriolanus' pride is made uncontrollable by passion, which once provoked, sweeps away all common sense. He falls, but he is still faithful to his ideals:

> I will not do't,
> Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,
> And by my body's action teach my mind
> A most inherent baseness.[28]

This choice raises Coriolanus above the ordinary limits of self respect and even when his mother goads him into action, he can only half submit to the means which are necessary to obtain his ends. His prejudice of class, his pride, and his strict code of morals are the causes of his downfall, but the condition of the state must take its part of the blame. Circumstances compel him to display in excess qualities that under other conditions would have been esteemed noble.

The Tempest, The Winter's Tale, and Cymbeline are the three complete plays which represent the final period of Shakespeare's authorship. In their general tone, they form a little group by themselves. The Tempest is generally held to be Shakespeare's last independent contribution to the stage. Through Prospero, Shakespeare is surveying the whole province of man. He has felt the sting of wrongs and

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27 Ibid., p. 1287.

28 Coriolanus, III, ii, 120-124.

has undergone suffering; his dukedom has been taken away; and he and his three year old daughter have been exposed to the mercy of the waves. Yet, Prospero recognizes the weaknesses within himself. He has been living an impractical life, away from the world. Even on the island he was subject to impatience, moments of irritability.

At the last he has learned patience and wisdom. Although he retains his sensitiveness to wrong, he harbors no bitterness. After all the suffering he has undergone at the hands of Alonzo and Sebastian, he can think of them and say:

> Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
> Do I take part: the rarer action is
> In virtue than in vengeance;[29]

At the same time he speaks, Prospero recognizes that their natures have not been changed, that they are the same evil characters who

> . . . entertain'd ambition
> Expell'd remorse and nature[30]

He has tried so hard without success to raise and soften the brute Caliban, who still has some affinities with the higher world of spirits when he can hear their music. Yet, with all this incurable evil in the world, Prospero has learned to pity and forgive. He has learned that men's evil actions are due to

> . . . ignorant fumes that mantle
> Their clearer reason.[31]

and that virtue is the higher wisdom.

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29 The Tempest, V, i, 26-29.

30 Ibid., V, i, 74-75.

31 Ibid., V, i, 67-68.

Thus, with this survey of concepts of good and of evil in the plays of Shakespeare, I feel there is a definite progression of ideas with particular reference to the problem of evil.

In the first period of his writing, Shakespeare is not concerned with the evil in a man's heart; he is interested in what a man achieves. If he is an evil character, as almost all the kings in the historical plays are, he suffers defeat. But in his early period, Shakespeare shows environment to be partially responsible for producing evil characters. Romeo and Juliet is almost wholly a tragedy of environment, created by the feud between the two houses, and made even more terrible by the element of a hostile fate. The tragedy of Julius Caesar, too, comes from confusion within the state, but this time man begins to take his share of the blame in his reaction to the world about him. The story of Hamlet is chiefly a tragedy of character, but still it is linked to a disturbance in state and family life.

Through the period of the great tragedies, it seems true that a sense of wrong must have been pressing deeply upon Shakespeare, but this awareness of the possibilities of goodness was also becoming greater. His knowledge of good and of evil grew together. In Othello environment seems to exert such a crushing influence that if it were not for the fact that evil perishes, there would be complete darkness. Although Lear exhibits some of the same pessimism with regard to hostile forces, yet good survives and evil admits defeat. Human suffering has not been in vain. Shakespeare emerges from this period to write Macbeth, Timon, and Coriolanus, still aware of the influence of environment but more aware of the individual as the author of his own woes and of those about him. While these plays are depressing, they

are not more convincingly so than the preceding tragedies. Since there is not the intensity of emotion and thought, they seem to be written more for dramatic exercises. In Macbeth, Shakespeare seems to be interested in the poetry he can lavish. He has not poured so much of his being into Timon and Coriolanus, for they are not so greatly creative. Most critics agree that certain plays were written to meet the demands of court entertainment. Shakespeare had only three months to compose Macbeth, a play that would be a compliment to King James and at the same time, familiarize Englishmen with James' Scottish ancestors. In various ways, Shakespeare paid deference to the new sovereign; for example, Banquo is founder of the Stuart dynasty, and in one scene, James is represented as one of his descendants; the king has the ability to heal scrofula by touch; and the final triumph of the English army over Macbeth can be regarded as a tribute to King James.[32]

In the last period of his authorship, as Shakespeare still thinks upon the injustices and terrible circumstances man is called upon to endure, he comes to accept life as it is, to forgive, and to love. Through all of the plays, he has never lost the feeling that the universe is favorable to good and hostile to evil. At times, environment seems to exert a force greater than man can endure, but always the tragedy comes from the manner in which man reacts to his surroundings. In the tragedies, this deepens as

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[32] J. Q. Adams, op. cit., p. 375.

well as heightens the inscrutable mystery since the noblest men crumble along with the most villainous. At the end, if Prospero is voicing Shakespeare's thought, he can survey the whole human life, the spacious world; and with the knowledge of terrible evils around him, through his nobler reason, see wisdom in virtue.

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